

Consuming Newness

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Gina awkwardly balanced her paper plate and tumbler glass while stepping over a pair of wooden crutches on the floor. Her eyes flitted from one girl's face to another desperately trying to make eye contact. Everyone else admired the pictures of nameless faces on the walls and the arrangement of the worn furniture. She finally inched her way over to the edge of a bed, sitting lop-sided on a mound of stuffed animals.

The pizza party was for the new girls in the sorority and was organized by the girls in their second year who lived in the dorm. The pledges had been formally invited, and refusing to go was considered rude. The dorm room seemed like an ideas place, but it filled up quickly with cliques of eager pledges. The pizza sat on its cardboard square while the girls milled around each other. Some girls sat on the used carpet piece and arranged themselves around the edges of the cramped room. Each girl spoke with her new-found friend and tugged on doughy crusts. The week's studies faded into the background of chatter.

Teetering on the soft animals, Gina concentrated on the conversation next to her. The weight of the two sitting girls combined hardly dented the bed. The girl in a soft cardigan sweater with tiny knit cables lamented the biology test she had on Monday. The other girl ate her partner's words and nodded eagerly, chomping on her pizza slice at the same time. You'll be great, she said, because you always do well. They exchanged supportive smiles and continued to talk.

Gina remembered the biology course she took over the summer. Arguments boiled in the car as her mother drove her from work to night school. Did you study over your lunch break? she asked. Gina looked out the car window and watched people stopped in traffic. The dinner-time rush inched its way through the city, melting in the hot sun. Her mother's words went untouched as the songs on the car radio took Gina back to junior high afternoons when she walked home from school and listened to her leather shoes click on the sidewalk. The undisturbed silence lasted for hours before she saw her mother's chocolate-brown station wagon pull up in the driveway. No one questioned her, no one disturbed

her silence.

Gina glanced nervously around the square room. She wanted another piece of pizza. The tomato sauce stains on her paper plate tugged at her stomach. But, the thought of politely making a spectacle of herself as she would squeeze back through the crowd to eat more changed her mind. Moving clumsily among the sorority girls turned Gina's hollow stomach. I should throw away my plate to make me forget pizza, she thought. But, the stuffed wastebasket proudly stood across the room by the open doorway. Having seconds means giving in to what they think I'll do, Gina thought. She sat still.

She flashed back to the first time she had a second helping of au gratin potatoes when the sorority houseboys began to clear the table. The stares came so fast that her mind stopped for a moment to register what she saw. The metal clank of the spoon as its handle dropped on the side of the empty bowl echoed and bounced off wallpapered walls. If she could have rewound the scene and started it over, she would have. Facing the stares of curvy girls at mealtimes forced Gina to get used to staying in her hard chair when the houseboys called for seconds.

Gina continued to listen in and sample little bits of lively conversations around the room. The girls stood attentive in tight circles. Gina forced an unconvincing smile. If they only knew what each other really thought, she said to herself. But, even after so many silent remarks, Gina felt invisible. She had hoped the pizza party would make meeting others easier. She itched the back of her hand and craned her neck to see the lime-green skirt across the room. It was cut straight and accentuated the girl's slight legs. Gina had worn baggy chino pants with an oversized peach sweater. She felt the pants' legs squeezing her thighs, binding her fatty thighs as she sat on the bed. The thought of the girls gawking at her tight pants inched Gina's arms forward until her hands reached her knees. With her arms locked, Gina protected her thighs from possible looks.

Gina imagined Dr. Victors lecturing her about diet inside her head. She watched his fingers nervously twist a ballpoint pen and tap the sparkling, formica counter-top. His stethoscope hung from his neck and swung like a pendulum when he turned to choose the pamphlets about diet control. Dr. Victors barely filled his white lab coat and forest green twill slacks. His lanky arm stretched out to Gina to offer more reading material: "Your

diet—Your body," "Eat for your life." He'd never know fatness, she thought as he got up to escaped Gina's smirk.

Her mind returned to the humid room. She had dropped her napkin on the carpet during her daydreaming, but she still held her plate. Bending over to pick it up meant sliding off the lump of stuffed animals. She kicked the napkin wad with her wide shoe and watched it roll next to the girl from New Jersey. This girl insisted on telling everyone about New York City. I go there by myself, she would say. Gina heard her explaining the drinking laws out east to her circle of naive ears.

The voices continued around her, ignoring the absence of her conversation. Week-end stories and boy's names popped up like popcorn around the room. Girls laughed together and remembered the things they had done while drunk last night. Gina had stayed home and worked on a cross-stitch project for her aunt's Christmas present. Listening to the girls ask each other about the boys they had each ended up with last night made Gina feel uneasy. I woke up in his room at 3:30 this morning, a girl laughed as she ran her cherry-red painted fingernails through her matted, bleached hair. The other girls comically gasped in admiration. Gina noticed that they continued eating pizza slices and exploded with conversation. They can't get enough of each other, Gina thought.

An Oriental girl with a thick, shiny bob haircut was gently stepping over the same wooden crutches that Gina had fumbled with earlier. Her white neck stood out from the black background of her hair. Her petite hands held up the paper plate containing one slice of sausage and cheese pizza. The gold bracelet watch dangled from her thin wrist. Her kelly green cotton sweater read "IRELAND," and her khaki shorts were wrinkle-free. Her white Keds sneakers seemed to float over the carpet and direct her around the circles of girls that talked and ate and sipped their water—all at the same time.

Had Gina had enough to eat, the Oriental girl asked with a friendly smile. Gina excused the poor choice of words and began to push the stuffed animals behind her in order to scoot down to make room for this girl. Her black hair swung to a stop when she finally stood in front of Gina, resting her weight on one foot. Gina knew by her comfortable pose that the spot she'd cleared would remain open. Sitting next to the fat girl meant coming close to flabby arms and pudgy cheeks, thought Gina. But, her disdain couldn't match her

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delight at just having someone to talk to, not to mention be seen with. Until now, no one had approached her or even made eye contact. She looked up at the Oriental girl's eyes and waited to make conversation.

The girl's name was Lynn, she told Gina, and she knew that Gina was from Ohio. Nibbling her pizza crust and rolling back and forth from one foot to the other, the girl waited for Gina's response. Gina just sat and stared at the girl's forehead and watched it crinkle up as she chewed. How would she know that I was from Ohio? Gina wondered. Gina sensed Lynn's confidence. Lynn glanced over to the room's doorway to respond to a "Hi, Lynn" from a late-arriving girl with the same style of bob haircut.

Her attention returned to Gina. Gina's stomach turned inside her. I can smell fake friendship a mile away, Gina thought. Lynn ate her pizza and licked her finger where tomato sauce had dripped. She acts like she is listening, Gina said to herself and gazed at the glass party favors on the dresser next to the bed. Lynn used her napkin on her mouth and asked Gina again if she wanted more pizza. Gina feebly shook her head "no."

Ohio was where Gina went to a private girl's high school. Gina's parents researched private schools all over the state and finally decided on Balesfield. It was at the opposite end of the state from her hometown, almost a seven hour drive. The name of the state flung her mind into scenes of her father in the rain quickly emptying the car of Gina's luggage and milk crates and prissy, rich girls setting out flowered, enamel picture frames of boys and best friends back home. Gina never even had the pictures to fill the frames. She recalled energetic girls like Lynn sporting two-hundred dollar outfits and gold jewelry.

Her parents traveled to Spain the month after Gina left for school. Gina watched herself in her mind checking brown-papered packages for her name then opening up her mailbox lucky to pull out a worn postcard with her mother's slanted words reporting their dream trip. The next card would come three months later from California and then from Japan. At first Gina would tape them on her mirror over her dresser, but eventually they landed in the trash next to the mailroom.

Late nights on weekends at Balesfield left Gina alone in her quiet dorm room. Car loads of girls migrated to a nearby town to hunt for the opposite sex. Delivered pizzas and cross-stitch kept Gina company until the first cars returned with noisy victors, then she went

to bed. No one would want to be with me anyway, thought Gina, so why should I go. She didn't even want to hear what she was missing. The girls eventually left her alone, and the invitations stopped. It's easier this way, Gina decided.

She hated Ohio. She hated that school.

The Oriental girl was from Chicago and not Ohio, but she had some friends who lived there. Gina nodded and donated a small smile to the dying conversation. Gina didn't even want it to continue. She had suffered enough wounds during the short conversation with Lynn's mention of pizza and Ohio. She despised being patronized. It's probably harder for fat people to mix and mingle, Gina silently read Lynn's mind.

She began to wonder if they all knew her background. They probably all guessed about her weight and made jokes about stuffing her into a movie seat. Lynn will report back about the fat girl after the party, Gina thought, the others will laugh and jokingly comment on how much pizza she ate. Lynn will explain how she tested the fat girl and tempted her with more pizza, Gina continued. She fumed and stared at Lynn's forehead as it continued to wrinkle with her chews.

She really wanted to be alone now. She just wanted the Oriental girl to leave and let her be alone.

But Lynn continued to sway back and forth in front of Gina. It was like she was pumping for more information because she felt obligated to make Gina feel comfortable. The laces on the white Keds sneakers clicked together. The chatter in the room faded to the back of Gina's mind as she looked at the perfect cuff of Lynn's walking shorts circle the thin, toned leg. Please give this conversation up, thought Gina. Tension seeped out of her temples when Lynn finally motioned and pivoted on her heel to go get some more Coke from the hallway. The cooler was in the hallway, she explained, because they didn't have room in the dorm room.

They could put the cooler where I'm sitting, thought Gina. Gina had to get out of the room. She scoped out her escape path to the door. There are so many girls in the way, she thought. She imagined them scurrying out of the way to avoid her flabby body. Her pant legs would scrape against each other as she walked, disturbing every conversation. The stares would weigh her down as she would inch clumsily through the room. Just concentrate

on the door, thought Gina.

Some pizza was still left, said a tiny girl wearing a denim mini-skirt. She also had those same white Keds sneakers. Gina wiggled her toes inside her shoes and leaned forward to set her paper plate on the desk by the window. She placed her hands behind her to securely push herself off the mushy bed. Her left hand landed on a stuffed penguin. Gina finally stood up but not to get pizza. Stepping sideways, she excused herself to a group of giggling girls who ignored her and stood just in front of the full length mirror on the wall.

The clusters of bent legs and empty plates dotted the floor. Gina moved slowly, making sure to avoid eye contact with any of the girls. An embarrassing sweat worked its way up to her forehead. But, she continued to step cautiously and stared at the open doorway.

Her hand grasped the brown metal door-frame. Gina brought both feet together and glanced over her shoulder. No one looked back. Famous faces from posters blankly stared and didn't care if she stayed or left. She saw Lynn moving across the room to get more pizza. Gina turned toward the doorway and caught a glimpse of a red cooler with water and ice and a can of Coke on its side. A stray napkin had flopped next to the cooler.

Gina walked through the doorway. The hallway was cool and quiet. A slight breeze worked its way up the green carpeted hall and met her damp hairline. Closed doors lined the walls that were spotted with chipped paint. The buzz of the party faded as Gina walked further down the hall toward the drinking fountain. Its silver body stuck out from the wall. She heard it rumble off and imagined the cold water chilling her teeth.

The silence reminded Gina of weekend nights at Balesfield. The scenes could have been interchanged. Rooms were empty and a thick quiet settled into every crevice of the dorm. Gina ran her fingers along the painted wall, moving slowly. She pictured the rooms she passed: the glossy posters, the pastel bedspreads, the gold-rimmed party favors. Her mind was calm, and her walk was unhurried. The bathrooms are near drinking fountains, Gina remembered, bathrooms are always by drinking fountains. She saw the swing door with the small sign just above eye-level.

The familiar, confident feeling shifted inside her as she placed her hand flat against the door. It opened smoothly and swung behind her. Her shoes clicked lightly on the blue-

tiled floor. Gina stopped past the row of white sinks below the long mirror around to the toilets. She paused to listen for anyone else in the bathroom. Smells of cleaning fluids hung in the air. A metal door of a stall hung slightly open, and Gina stepped in. She pushed the chrome latch firmly into its slot.

She could take her time. She knew no one was there. Her breath was warm on her fingers. She felt alone and new.



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